INL News Release
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Preparations for INL's 2011 fire season under way

IDAHO FALLS — Firefighters at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory are preparing for the 2011 wildland fire season. Every spring, the INL Fire Department reviews its fire preparation procedures and lessons learned from previous fires. This information is used to protect people, property and the environment at the desert site from future wildland fires.

Fire danger on INL's 890 square miles of high desert land west of Idaho Falls is expected to increase as the grasses and sagebrush dry during the summer.

"A normal fire potential is predicted for INL this summer in July and August and, as usual, much of our fire activity will be dependent on summer weather patterns, most notably our lightning experience," said INL Fire Chief Eric Gosswiller. "So as things dry out in July and August, we expect conditions that will support large fires."

"We had a cool and wet April, and May is off to a similar start so we may experience a delay in reaching peak fire conditions. Regardless of the conditions, we'll be prepared to respond to fires."

INL has an experienced and well-trained fire department that has proven itself during numerous wildland fires in the past. For example, in 2010, the Jefferson Fire burned more than 100,000 acres at the site. A blaze in 2000 burned more than 30,000 acres, and in 2007, the Twin Buttes Fire was a challenging blaze that burned 9,434 acres. In 2009, there was below-normal fire activity on the site, with three wildland fires that affected approximately 1 acre of INL land. Throughout this period, the INL site experienced no significant facility damage. Buffer zones containing little or no fire fuel exist around major buildings and facility complexes.

Three fire stations are located at the INL site, each with wildland firefighting equipment. The fire department maintains four heavy, Type 3 wildland fire engines and a 3,000-gallon water tender. Wildland firefighting units are outfitted with onboard compressed-air foam systems capable of making heavy, clinging or water-saturated foam that suppresses and blankets flames and protects exposures.

Additional heavy equipment, including bulldozers for fire line construction, is available from the INL fleet to support wildland firefighting. INL keeps at least 22 firefighting staff on duty at all times. If additional responders are needed, the fire department will recall off-duty employees to bring its force up to 75 qualified wildland firefighters.

If more equipment and/or workers are needed, INL has reciprocal firefighting agreements with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service and most regional fire departments including but not limited to the cities of Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, Pocatello, Arco, Rexburg, American Falls, Chubbuck and Rigby.

Additional planned actions, as conditions warrant, to reduce the dangers of a wildland range fire this summer are:
• Annual wildland fire hazard and vegetation assessments
• Aggressive vegetation control along facility perimeters and interconnecting roadways
• Fire danger advisories to all INL employees about the high fire potential and precautions they need to take
• Fire restrictions regarding the use of off-road vehicles and off-road activities
• Constant "real-time" weather monitoring stations
• Heavy equipment (bulldozers, scrapers, water tenders, etc.) to be maintained in readiness for wildland fire response
• Heavy-equipment operators trained for wildland fire response
• Restrictions on hot work activities (welding, etc.) outside facility perimeters, and
• Maintaining defensible spaces around important structures and equipment

INL's electrical power loop is redundant, so during wildland fires, power supplies are redirected and maintained. Major Site areas have emergency backup power supplies.

The INL Emergency Operations Center in Idaho Falls and all major facilities at the site maintain a fully trained and qualified response organization. Emergency control centers are located at each major facility complex. During a wildland fire, these groups are able to ensure timely communications with firefighting responders and execute necessary protective actions for INL facilities.

Risks to radiological facilities and important buildings at INL are manageable because of natural and constructed firebreaks, the predominant use of noncombustible construction materials, and the presence of reliable water supplies and automatic fire suppression systems at the site.

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